





Serendipity and Faith

A Conversation with

NARI WARD

BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

Nu Colossus, 2011. Boat, metal, wood, metal chimney, copper drum, furniture, Plexiglas, and rubber roofing membrane, approx. 720 x 336 x 168 in. Detail of installation at MASS MoCA.



Nari Ward’s monumental works merge mystery and meaning. His 2012 exhibition at Lehmann Maupin’s Chrystie Street gallery consisted of beautiful objects with double and triple meanings. Why would shoelaces embedded in a gallery wall spell out “We the People?” Why was a fox with an Afro-tail standing at the base of a police observation tower? Did the infrared light beam signal a gun targeting its prey or a policeman saving a victim?

Nu Colossus, 2011. Boat, metal, wood, metal chimney, copper drum, furniture, Plexiglas, and rubber roofing membrane.

Since earning his MFA at Brooklyn College in 1992, Ward has exhibited at numerous museums and galleries, including the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia; Galleria Continua in San Gimignano, Italy; the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; and Deitch Projects in New York. Last year, his mega-exhibition at Mass MoCA connected displaced workers in North Adams with their counterparts in his native Jamaica. *Amazing Grace* (1993), an iconic work originally created in an abandoned fire station in Harlem, was reinstalled in the New Museum’s Studio 231 space earlier this year. The recipient of a 2012 Rome Prize, Ward has also received the Willard L. Metcalf Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Pollock Krasner Foundation Award, and Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships. His work is in the collections of the Brooklyn Museum, the Whitney Museum, the Walker Art Center, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Galleria Civica di Arte in Turin.

Jan Garden Castro: “*Sub Mirage Lignum*,” your Mass MoCA exhibition, featured several massive works, including *Nu Colossus*—a juxtaposition of an old American fishing boat with an oversized, vortex-shaped, Jamaican fish trap filled with distressed furniture. Could you discuss the role of memory in your work? How did you discover these unlikely connections between the industrial town of North Adams and Jamaica?

Nari Ward: Denise Markonish, the curator, basically said, “Do whatever you need to do.” While I was at Mass MoCA, I got a chance to walk around several buildings—remnants of the old factory,

not yet open to the public. I was able to rummage through what I call “little treasures” and pick out what I needed to work with. For me, the memory part was inherent in going through the space. There was a distance between it being a productive space—people’s lives were spent there—and this emptiness. That’s the space that memory occupies—I’m trying to mine the memories of this particular space.

I had a fish trap that I found at a yard sale. It’s woven, about 15 inches long, with an industrious elegance of design. Once the fish goes through, he’s not able to come back out. It’s a trap, but



Left: *Mango Tourist*, 2011. Foam, battery canisters, Sprague Electric Company resistors and capacitors, and mango pits, 8 figures, approx. 120 in. each. Detail of installation at MASS MoCA. Right: *SoulSoil*, 2011. Earth, ceramic toilet fixtures, shoes, broom and mop handles, acrylic, and polyurethane, approx. 236 x 236 x 236 in.

it's also a portal, a one-way door. One can't come back out. I got intrigued with the possibility of using this form to talk about a viewer's relationship to a moment—the idea that we can never relive a moment. We go into it, it changes us, and we're in a different place, but we can never recover that moment in its entirety. So, the trap became a metaphor for that possibility and that limitation; it's also a visually eloquent form.

I decided that I needed to make a dialogue between the form and the place—a stopped moment in time. The boat was a happy accident. While I was working on the fish conduit, Denise sent out a memo explaining what I was doing—contrasting the fragile economy of North Adams as a former site of Sprague production equipment and that of Jamaica, both now economically dependent on outside forces and trying to rebuild themselves through the arts. Somebody wrote back that a boat was available, and I got really excited about having another kind of dialogue between the boat and the device that I was working on. The suspended boat became another way to layer the ideas in the work; in a way, the boat becomes the viewer, just like the fox becomes the viewer in *T. P. Reign Bow*.

JGC: *Why is the fish trap filled with run-down furniture?*

NW: I wanted to emulate a material that has gone through some transformation. I'd have liked to throw everything on the beach to wear down naturally, but we didn't have time for that, so we painstakingly sanded everything down.

The idea was to take away some of the surface, the character. I wanted to talk about the idea of time. I was trying to talk about the notion of a past time, but I didn't want it to be nostalgic—I wanted to energize it.

The *Nu Colossus* vortex was a way to energize the furniture, almost as if the pieces were sacrificial elements used to activate the piece visually and spiritually. When you look into the vortex, there's a sense of movement and action antithetical to the broken stasis and sanded-down detritus—a fixed moment in relation to another moment.

As a sidebar about how memory seeps into decision-making, every time I looked down the vortex, I remembered watching the spaceship take off in "Star Trek." When I grew up in Jamaica, only "Bonanza," "Star Trek," and the news were on. My family had the only TV on the block, and it was a big event to come and watch TV at our house. When I look down into the vortex, it feels like the Enterprise going into warp drive. Somehow, trying to actualize that came out in this piece for me.



Above: Installation view of “Nari Ward: Liberty and Orders,” Lehmann Maupin Gallery, 2012. Left: *Amazing Grace*, 1993/2013. Approx. 300 baby strollers and fire hoses, view of installation at the New Museum.



JGC: You used wood from an Anselm Kiefer work for the fish trap. It seemed like it filled a space three stories high, so the size and scale were noteworthy.

NW: Kiefer had an undulating cement and rebar piece, *The Wave*, in the same space, but he didn’t like the floor, so the collector who owns the work was generous enough to create a hemlock floor. The wood hadn’t dried out properly though, so it was coming to life, starting to warp, move, and do crazy things. By the time Kiefer’s show was over, the hemlock was so bent that it couldn’t be repurposed. But, for me, it was the perfect material, and I used it all. That serendipity was an exciting part of working at Mass MoCA.

The idea of faith is another part of my practice: waiting for the material, the pressure, and the situation to tell me what needs

to happen before I come to some decisions about where things need to go. That’s why it’s really important—to me, anyway—to keep the process as open as possible. I have a backup plan but am prepared to react to the moment.

JGC: You’ve already mentioned the fox in T. P. Reign Bow. I’ve read that your discovery of the fox was a climactic part of the process.

NW: I wanted to use the height of the space and had several different projects in mind, but I couldn’t quite figure out which direction to take. Martin Luther King’s birthday had just passed, and Cornell West was on TV at the time, talking about being arrested. He’s very flamboyant in his intellect, and he said, “If you’re not getting arrested on Martin Luther King’s birthday, you’re not celebrating it correctly.” Even though I have some issues with Cornell, he’s a poetic, brilliant guy, and I wanted to have a dialogue with this strange idea that he introduced. So, I said, “I need to get a fox.” In a lot of folk tales, the fox is the clever, mischievous intellect. I decided I had to get my own mascot. The Afro-tail became a direct reference to him.

While I was in Philadelphia getting ready for the opening of my show at the Fabric Workshop, I was bidding on-line to buy the fox. I won the bid and raced to my opening, after which I took a taxi to the suburbs, around midnight, to pick up the fox. What I didn’t expect was to be pulled over by the police. When I got to the house, I told the taxi to wait, grabbed the fox, and went back to my hotel. It didn’t dawn on me until recently that this fox is a “red fox.” It’s nice to make another connection, this time with Redd Foxx, a legend of comedy. I grew up with “Sanford and Son.”



Stall, 2011. Audio, wood, light bulbs, paper, cloth, laser prints of Arnold Print Works fabric patterns, and mirrored Plexiglas, 2 bays, 8.67 x 12 x 27.67 ft. each.

JGC: *The title T. P. Reign Bow is a pun, and the work itself features a police surveillance station with the fox at the bottom.*

NW: T. P. is an acronym for “tactical platform.” The sound of the letters—tee-pee—refers to Native American abodes. The idea of a rainbow is romantic, but reign is about authority and rule. I was trying to juxtapose something primal and elemental with something more authoritarian and domineering.

JGC: *Did the blue masking tape and tarps on the construction relate to Occupy Wall Street or anything like that?*

NW: I’ve seen these platforms in my neighborhood. They’re a show of power by the police. I get it. Tactical platforms are generally placed in high-crime or crime-control areas. This new technology is coming from the military. It’s also a show using visual codes: we’re higher, above you, and we’re looking at you.

I got intrigued with the notion of building a tower using materials that would make it seem temporary. I wouldn’t say that I was linking it with Occupy, but the language of the tarp was in the news as a reference to the temporary and makeshift. I was bringing these seemingly contradictory things into the same form.

JGC: *There are many other things going on in T. P. Reign Bow: a spiral of zippers, lasers.*

NW: The grommets overdo what would be the normal structure of the tarp. I didn’t want to bring in anything inconsistent with that material. People think they’re bullet holes or peepholes, and I like the possibilities that opened up. I call it a “Rapunzel” moment. The idea was to take one narrative—the idea of the surveillance platform—and interject another narrative that might be a little more poetic, more playful. I started to think about how fairy tales deal with heavy things and use them as a teaching tool while also creating visually rich metaphors. There’s a stream of zippers coming down that pools on the floor. The zippers have human hair caught in them, which causes a moment of anxiety. You react viscerally. I decided to take a moment of tension and keep repeating it—to make it melodic or even rhythmic and meditative. It goes from being anxiety driven to, on the floor, mesmerizing. Cornell, the fox, is witnessing that zipper line turning into a visual puddle, or, in some ways, a meditation.

JGC: *There are two images made with shoelaces: We the People and Scape.*

NW: The shoelaces are part of the wall. Holes were made, and the shoelaces were pulled through. The idea was to use something that referenced the body and, more generally, an anonymous mass of people. Shoelaces are specific and discrete. Everyone, from the very young on up, has the experience of tying them. I wanted to use this almost invisible thing and make it have a presence. I wanted to use the Preamble to the Constitution and then slow down the recognition of the text—first seeing the recognition of the laces and then understanding what’s being signed—presented—to you. The laces, for me, are a way of bringing a different kind of movement and intensity into the text. The same intensity applies to *Scape*, which was, for me, a really important piece in the show. So much of the work touches on the sociopolitical questions that I have, even if it’s coming from a personal standpoint, that I wanted this other piece, which is like an escape or spiritual transcendence. What I like about *Scape* is that it turns the entire building into a spaceship. This is the “close encounters” moment when the stairs come down. You’re never sure what’s going to happen.

Jan Garden Castro is a writer living in Brooklyn, New York.